

## Phil & Monica Noll

December 1, 2014



### Photography worthy of the Smithsonian

Husband-and-wife photography team Phil and Monica Noll spend most of their time hiking and photographing when not working for the Laboratory's Environmental Protection and Waste Management Divisions. One of Phil's photos, "Symphony of Light," even received the distinct honor of being shown at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., as part of its Wilderness Forever exhibit, which will remain on display through the summer of 2015. Monica is an accomplished photographer in her own right.

Photographing nature often involves hiking long distances in rough terrain, enduring bad weather and other challenges and patiently waiting for just the right light. On this particular Halloween morning the Nolls are getting ready for an all-day hike in the backcountry of Utah's Zion National Park to photograph the Subway, a picturesque natural canyon whose rounded walls resemble an urban subway tunnel.

It's cold and pitch-dark when the Nolls take their first tentative steps down a steep canyon wall at 6 a.m. Helped only by the dim light of the one headlamp still functioning at this point, the Nolls continue to make their way as best as they can in the absence of a well-defined trail. The Left Fork of North Creek gurgles peacefully 1000 feet below, and a pack of coyotes is yipping in the distance.

The first rays of light begin to illuminate the canyon just as the Nolls reach the creek and turn northeast toward the Subway, still four miles away. They follow the stream, sometimes wading in frigid water up to their knees, sometimes scrambling over boulders and logs along the creek's edge. The Nolls find portions of a path here and there, but the trail sections are always short and lead back to the stream. Progress is difficult and slow.

About 10 o' clock, the Nolls reach Arch Angel Falls and take their cameras and tripods out of their backpacks. "Arch Angel Falls is a haphazard stairway of maroon-colored sandstone," Phil explains, "with water pouring over it in all directions."

Soon thereafter the Nolls reach the Crack, another scenic spot. "The Crack is a roughly four-inch-wide, 100-to-100-foot-long cut in the stream bed's solid bedrock," Monica says. "Much of the water from the Left Fork of North Creek gets funneled through this skinny slice, but the channeled water is surprisingly quiet."

## **The Statue of Liberty**

As the Nolls approach the Subway, two huge Ponderosas lean gracefully over their reflections in the stream. The canyon walls tower far above the Nolls' heads and are a mix of pastel pinks, lavenders, milky oranges and even some blues. The Nolls continue about a hundred yards in ankle-deep water, the canyon walls closing in with every step.

"When we get to the Subway's oval entrance, the walls are semicircles," Phil notes. "A few feet later the tunnel turns left and reveals a series of aqua-colored pools filled with fallen leaves, each pool pouring into the one below. Some of the pools have small eddies where the leaves collect and drift in endless circles."

While the Nolls begin to photograph the stunning scene, Phil comments on the slippery bedrock, but it's too late. His wife already has lost her footing and plunges into the water. "Yet like a true professional," Phil laughs, "Monica instinctively protected her equipment at the expense of herself. She landed in the creek like the Statue of Liberty, lying on her side and holding the camera like a 'torch.'"

The Nolls stay several hours, photographing the warm sunlight bouncing off the Subway walls. "The dynamic range of light is so extreme here," Monica suggests, "that for most compositions we shoot a number of frames at different exposures to capture everything from shadows to highlights. We'll later use our home computer to blend the frames together into a single photograph."

The best light starts to fade as the Nolls pack up and return the way they had arrived. Moving faster than they had in the chilly morning, they make good time. The Nolls finally

reach the area where they had descended into the canyon so many hours before and, nearly exhausted, begin to climb. They step onto the canyon rim around 5 p.m.

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Monica Noll works for the Waste Management Division's Waste Management Programs organization, Phil Noll for the Environmental Protection Division's Environmental Stewardship group.

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## Resources

To learn more about Phil and Monica Noll, visit the [Phil and Monica Noll's Raven Mountain Images](#) website.

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